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ABSTRACT

Parental decisionmaking is the keystone of any voucher model. This paper examines the parental decisionmaking process as it has unfolded in the educational voucher experiment in the Alum Rock school system near San Jose, California. The author assumed at the outset that parents cannot make intelligent choices between schooling alternatives if they lack knowledge about the alternatives or if they are unable to see the differences between the alternatives. The author found that the Alum Rock experience seems to support the voucher model premise that parents want to influence school decisions and that the use of vouchers will increase parental interest in school decisionmaking. The assumption that parents are competent to make schooling decisions received only mixed support from the results of the Alum Rock demonstration. At the onset of the demonstration, ignorance of voucher opportunities and policies was greatest among the segment of the population that was supposed to benefit the most from having a choice in schooling--the educationally disadvantaged. But, as the voucher demonstration progressed, awareness of vouchers increased although non-English speaking Mexican-Americans continued to be the least aware of voucher opportunities. (Author/JF)

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PARENTAL DECISION MAKING IN AN EDUCATION VOUCHER SYSTEM

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PARENTAL DECISION MAKING IN AN EDUCATION VOUCHER SYSTEM[1]

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The question of parental choice in schooling has been of limited interest in the past, because there has been very little variation in schooling decisions. The vast majority of American children simply attend the public school in their neighborhood; although at last report, some 5.1 million or 10 percent of the pupils were enrolled in private elementary and secondary schools (Grant, 1973, p. 3-4).[2] In theory, parents can exert some control over their child's schooling, or at least the location of the schooling,[3] by: (a) moving the family residence to a preferred school attendance area (the same effect can be gained by lying about one's address or registering at someone else's address), (b) requesting an inter-school transfer, (c) asking for a particular teacher, classroom or program, assuming the school contains multiple classes at each grade level, (d) going outside the public school system to private schools, if any are available, or (e) keeping the child out of school altogether.

Obviously, these options are not equally available to all parents. The major constraint is money; it takes money to move to a better neighborhood, and it takes money to go to a private school. And where money is not a factor, social influence is; it takes some degree of influence to secure an intra-district administrative transfer between schools or to control a child's assignment to a particular subprogram, classroom or teacher within a school. The net effect of these constraints is that, with a few

exceptions, the wealthy have more schooling options than the poor. But there are a few settings in which parents have real choices, and it is in these settings that the study of parental choice in schooling becomes feasible. Education vouchers pose one such situation.

Education Vouchers

The basic idea of education vouchers is simply that school districts provide parents with direct grants of money to implement their choices among schooling alternatives; with these vouchers, they may buy their way into any school that will have them. In theory, providing parents with direct money grants to buy schooling sets in motion a complex causal chain which results in improved student performance and increased parental satisfaction. Figure 1 summarizes this causal sequence.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

Supposedly, vouchers will cause a broader range of schools to enter the educational marketplace, and because parents will have direct control over school purse strings, teachers and administrators will be more responsive to parents' wishes and children's needs. This will somehow lead to instructional innovation which will result in improved student performance and increased parental satisfaction. What these educational innovations might be is anyone's guess; however, most people seem to think that it is more a matter of faithfully applying the teaching technology that we have, not the development of magic new systems. Stated quite harshly, vouchers operate on the premise that students will perform better if schools try harder, and schools will try harder if they are directly accountable to parents who have a big financial stick with which to exact performance. The voucher scheme is merely a means for distributing the financial sticks to parents.

The basic voucher idea, of course, is not new. Adam Smith and Thomas Paine in the eighteenth century and John Stuart Mill in the ninteenth century argued for such a system.[4] Several alternative versions of the basic voucher idea have been proposed, and the assumptions vary widely about how each version will operate and what each will achieve. This explains how such strange bedfellows as free market economist Milton Friedman (1962, 1974) and liberal sociologist Christopher Jencks (1971a, 1971, 1968a, 1968b; Areen and Jencks, 1971) both can be voucher proponents; they are talking about vastly different versions of the basic voucher model.

Friedman's free market model, the so-called conservative voucher model, would give money to parents and then turn them loose on the educational economy without further regulation. In contrast, Jencks' conpensatory voucher model, the liberal model, would impose substantial control over the use of vouchers. Specifically, the compensatory voucher model requires that:

1. Every child receives a voucher which is equal in value to the average per student expenditure of the school district,

2. Disadvantaged children or those in need of compensatory training receive vouchers which are worth more (perhaps by as much as a factor of three) and this is supposed to make them more attractive to schools,

3. Overapplied schools, those which receive more applications than they have positions available, must pick half of their entrants by lottery. Those who are not picked by lottery may include: (a) founders children, (b) siblings of children who are already in the school, and (c) those with special talents that would contribute to the school,

4. Schools may not charge more than the value of the vouchers, and parents may not use their own funds to supplement the value of the voucher.

To be sure, not everyone is overjoyed with the notion of using vouchers to reorganize the delivery of schooling,[5] (see, for example, Lekachman, 1971; Berube, 1971; LaNoue, 1971; Butts, 1974; Selden, 1970) and even proponents of one or another of the voucher schemes express some reservations. In Education

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Vouchers, the Center for the Study of Public Policy (1970, p. 12-13) identified five potential problems. These included:

1. Racial segregation or class segregation may be exacerbated;

2. The traditional separation between church and state may be weakened;

3. Under a free market arrangement, simple inflation of schooling costs may occur; and the rich will use their own funds to supplement public funds in order to acquire superior schooling for their children, and thus the relative disadvantage of the poor will continue;

4. The public schools stand to become the dumping grounds or schools of last resort for those children who are rejected everywhere else;

5. Parents may not be able to make intelligent decisions because they cannot discern differences between schools or programs, or because they do not care to make schooling decisions.

The last point raises some particularly important questions. The decision behavior of parents is central to the voucher model (Figure 1), yet little is known about how parents make schooling decisions or for that matter, how competent or interested they are in making specific decisions about the education of their children. Some of the important questions about parental decision processes in a voucher system are as follows:

1. Do parents wish to exert influence over school decisions; and if so, what are the areas of decision making that they wish to influence.

2. Are parents in a voucher system aware of the opportunities and alternatives that vouchers provide?

3. What are their sources of information about voucher policies?

4. How accurate is their information about voucher policies?

5. What are the factors which influence parents to choose certain kinds of programs for their children? What kinds of children end up in what kinds of instructional programs?

(The answers to these questions, of course, may vary with parents' ethnicity, educational background, socioeconomic status, alienation, and other demographic and social characteristics). To answer some of these questions about family choice in schooling, the National Institute of Education (NIE) has funded an elementary education voucher demonstration (EEVD) in the public school system in the Alum Rock area of San Jose, California.

The Alum Rock Education Voucher Demonstration

The voucher demonstration in Alum Rock began in 1972 with six publically funded elementary schools, and then expanded in 1973 to include a total of 13 elementary schools; each school offers between three and five alternative programs or "mini-schools". Each spring, parents of eligible children are issued a voucher and information about each of the mini-schools, and then they make a placement decision for each of their children for the coming year. Program transfers may be requested at any time during the year, and free transportation is provided to non-neighborhood voucher schools, so it is reasonable to assume that the different mini-schools provide parents with about equal cost schooling alternatives.

The mini-schools redeem the vouchers in order to secure operating funds; and in theory, the value of the standard voucher is equal to the district's average per child expenditure. About 69 percent of the students receive compensatory vouchers which are worth more than the standard vouchers and are intended to provide educationally disadvantaged students with compensatory learning services. In the first year of the voucher demonstration, compensatory vouchers were worth an additional $237.77 for elementary school students and $301.55 for middle school students. This year the compensatory voucher is worth a flat $275 more than the standard voucher; students who are receiving ESEA Title I funds are given a discounted compensatory voucher worth $90.

The voucher demonstration in Alum Rock is a watered down version of the liberal, compensatory voucher scheme, but it is limited entirely to publically funded schools. Some people (e.g., California Teachers Association, 1974, p. 16) argue that the Alum Rock demonstration should be viewed merely as an open enrollment system or an alternative public school scheme; many observers believe that this demonstration cannot test the assumptions of the general voucher model, and that the demonstration will have only limited generalizability to other school systems (e.g. Berube, 1971).

Probably the fairest statement that can be made is that the Alum Rock demonstration cannot prove that vouchers will work, but it can prove that they won't work. The Alum Rock situation contains many of the central elements of the general voucher model (e.g. parental decision making), and if things go awry at this basic level, then for sure more complex voucher models will fail. On the other hand, if the Alum Rock voucher system succeeds, it means only that the most basic assumptions of the voucher syster are viable.

The Rand Corporation is responsible for the external evaluation of the voucher demonstration, and in the last two years they have mounted surveys of parents and teachers and collected observational data in classrooms and achievement and affective test data from students. This report is based on survey data collected in face-to-face interviews of two samples of voucher parents. The first group, consisting of 600 parents or about ten percent of the households involved with vouchers during the first year of the demonstration, was interviewed in the fall of 1972, at the outset of the demonstration. Another sample of 286 parents was interviewed in the fall of 1973, at the beginning of the second year of the demonstration; all of these people had children in the voucher schools during the first year of the demonstration. The probability sampling methods used in these surveys produced samples which closely parallel the ethnic distribution of parents in Alum Rock:

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about 45 percent were Mexican-American, 11 percent were black, 36 percent were Anglo, and 8 percent were from other ethnic groups. Now, using the data collected in these two surveys, we will address the questions about parental decision-making which were identified earlier. The first question concerns parental interest in influencing school decisions.

Parental Involvement in School Decision Making

The voucher scheme is built on the supposition that parents want to be involved in school decisions which affect their children, and the survey data collected from voucher parents in Alum Rock seem to support this proposition. Parents were asked about the appropriateness of parental influence in four areas of school decision making: (a) hiring and firing teachers, (b) hiring and firing principals, (c) curriculum content, and (d) school spending. Tables 1 and 2 summarize their responses.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 About Here

At the outset of the voucher demonstration, parents' interest in influencing school decisions was related to the area of decision making; curriculum content was the area of decision making that most concerned these respondents, and teacher personnel decisions were of the least concern. In every area of decision making, the more educated parents expressed more interest in influencing school decisions; this was especially true in the area of curriculum content decisions.

By the beginning of the second year of the demonstration a large percentage of parents expressed an interest in influencing school decisions, and this was true for all four areas of decision making. It appears that the voucher scheme increased parental desires to influence school decisions, although other hypotheses must also be considered. Perhaps these changes

reflect a nationwide or at least a local trend toward increased parent involvement in school decisions.

Generally, parents wanted to participate in school decision-making, and education vouchers provide them with a means of exerting influence. But parents in a voucher regime cannot exercise their influence effectively unless they have adequate, accurate information about the schooling choices they face.

Parental Awareness

In the fall of 1972, many parents were unaware of the voucher system's existence, even though their children had been enrolled in voucher schools for two months by the time the interviews were conducted. The data in Table 3

Insert Table 3 About Here
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show that, of the 600 parents who were interviewed, 105 or 17 percent claimed that they had never heard of education vouchers and of the 496 parents who had heard of vouchers, 23 percent could not remember in which particular program their child was enrolled. They could recall the name of the school, but not the mini-school or program that they had selected for their child. Thus, of the 600 respondents who had children in voucher schools, over 200 were unaware of even the most rudimentary details of their children's schooling.

Awareness of the voucher program was related to the ethnicity and social class of the respondent, and having children in Alum Rock schools during the year prior to the advent of the voucher demonstration was also a factor in parental awareness. At the beginning of the demonstartion, Anglos were best informed; 90 percent knew about the voucher model and 83 percent were able to name the exact program in which their child was participating. Black parents were the next most informed group; 86 percent of the black respondents had heard of the voucher program. Mexican-Americans, particularly those

interviewed in Spanish, were the least informed about the voucher system. Among English-speaking Chicanos, 78 percent were aware of the plan; but among non-English-speaking Chicanos, only 66 percent were aware of the voucher scheme.

Of those respondents who did not graduate from high school, 26 percent did not know about the voucher model; among those respondents who had graduated from high school, only 7 percent were ignorant of the voucher model. Also, as one would expect, parents who had children in the Alum Rock schools for the first time were less aware of the voucher system than the "old-timers." Only 69 percent of the parents who were new to Alum Rock schools (n = 249) were aware of vouchers, whereas the percentage for other parents, "old-timers" (n = 351), was 86 percent. Taken together the data suggest that, at the beginning of the demonstration, awareness of vouchers was greater among Anglos and blacks relative to Chicanos, and greater among middle class and better-educated parents.

By the beginning of the second year of the demonstration, the percentage of parents who were aware of vouchers had risen from 83 percent to 97 percent; and as the data in Table 3 show, educational background and ethnicity were unrelated to awareness because all subgroups within the population were approaching general awareness. Parents' knowledge of their children's mini-school program followed essentially the same pattern that was found in the first year of the demonstration. Anglos were best informed, and non-English speaking Mexican-Americans were the least informed.

Many theories can be advanced to explain why some parents learned about vouchers faster than other parents; but one obvious possibility is that some parents, particularly in educationally advantaged families, are plugged into better information networks. "How did parents learn about vouchers?"; this is the question we will consider next.

Sources of Information About Vouchers

In 1972, aware parents were asked to indicated which of eleven potential sources had provided them with information about vouchers (See Table 4). The average voucher parent cited four different sources, but

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Insert Table 4 About Here

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the number of sources used, like awareness of vouchers, was related to the respondent's educational background and ethnicity. Anglo parents used the most sources of information (median 4.6) and Mexican-Americans used the fewest (3.2).

The eleven sources of information shown in Table 4 can be grouped into five categories according to their degree of personalization and active involvement. At one end of the personalization - involvement continuum we have the mass media: newspapers, radio and TV. These are the least personalized and involving sources of information. Next we have printed materials distributed by the school; these are aimed at the parents, rather than a general reading or listening audience, and therefore are more personalized than other print or broadcast materials. The third category of information includes all types of formal meetings; Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) gatherings, parent meetings and Board of Education meetings. Face-to-face conversations are the most personalized and involving type of communication, and we have broken this general category into two subcategories: talks with non-school people (e.g., other parents, children) and talks with school personnel (e.g., teachers, principals, counselors).

Printed materials from the schools are clearly the most widespread source of information about vouchers (87 percent). Contact with school personnel provided information to two-thirds of the aware parents, and conversations with children, neighbors, and other parents were sources of

information for about half of the parents. The mass media touched about half of the households, and formal meetings, although the least used source of information nevertheless were a source of guidance for more than 40 percent of the voucher parents who knew about vouchers.

The different ethnic groups varied in how many sources of information they used, and in general they also varied in the types of information they received. However, they differed very little in their reported exposure to the two major sources of information: talks with teachers (and principals) and printed school materials.

It seems plausible that those Mexican-Americans who speak little or no English would be prevented from easy access to some sources of voucher information (e.g., radio and TV broadcasts are mostly in English). However, the data in Table 4 do not support this notion. Mexican-Americans who were interviewed in Spanish were just as likely as those interviewed in English to have talked with school personnel, to have attended PTA and parent meetings and to have learned about vouchers through radio and TV broadcasts. In fact, those who speak predominantly (or only) Spanish in the home were more likely to have talked with teachers than were English-speaking Mexican-American respondents. The only area in which language may have been a constraining factor was in the case of the printed word: Printed school materials, school newsletters and newspapers.

Over 90 percent of the aware parents were willing to express an opinion about which source was the most helpful, and for 30 percent of these respondents this "best source" was printed school materials. Talks with teachers were cited as the best source by 20 percent of the aware parents and another 20 percent rated parent courselors as the best source of information. No other single source accounted for more than 7 percent of the "best source" mentions.

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Newspapers, talks with friends and children, and surprisingly, printed school materials were all rated as least helpful by at least 14 percent of the parents. Why printed school materials should be ranked so high on both the most and least useful lists is not clear; 30 percent of the sample thought that this was the single best source of information, and here we see that half that number, 15 percent, felt just the opposite. But a breakdown of these ratings by respondent ethnicity helps pinpoint the root of the dissatisfaction with school materials. Mexican-Americans who were interviewed in Spanish were almost twice as likely as Anglos to say that printed materials were the least helpful source of information about vouchers. And in the case of "most helpful" ratings, we find that fewer non-English-speaking Chicanos than other ethnic subgroupings gave school materials high marks for information value.

Perceived Adequacy of Information About Selected and Other Schools

Parent's knowledge of vouchers was related to ethnicity and educational background, but ethnicity and educational background turned out to be unimportant when it came to parents' ratings of their adequacy of information. About half of the aware parents interviewed in 1972 said they had enough information about the school they selected for their children; 26 percent said they would have liked to have had more information about the school they selected, and 23 percent of the parents simply could not say anything about the adequacy of their information for decision making.

Parents rated the adequacy of their information about other schools in about the same way they rated their information about the school they selected for their children; the correlation between these two ratings was .86. Forty-three percent of the respondents were satisfied with the information they had about non-selected schools: 26 percent wanted more information about these other schools, and about a third of the parents had

no feelings one way or the other.

It appears that at the outset of the demonstration, the aware parents fell into three categories. First, there were those who were satisfied with their level of information about both selected and other schools. This group included about half of the aware parents. A second group consisted of people who felt that they needed more information about both selected and other schools, and this included about one-quarter of the parents; the remaining one-quarter of the parents simply had not given the matter much thought.

The Alum Rock school district was responsible for distributing information to voucher parents and over 65 percent of the aware parents said the school system had done a "good" or a "very good" job; Anglos were more satisfied than Mexican-American or blacks, but there were no significant differences by educational level.

Accuracy of Information

Aware parents generally thought that they had enough information to make intelligent choices among the available mini-schools, but this does not mean that they actually had accurate information. They may have been satisfied with their information level, but often it is true that "ignorance is bliss;" and to assess how much they knew about voucher policies, parents were asked two questions. The first one concerned school transportation for voucher children who go to non-neighborhood schools, and the second question concerned the schools' transfer policies.

The school district provides free bus transportation for all voucher children who wish to attend a voucher school outside their neighborhood; if it were not for this service, the different mini-schools would not be equal cost alternatives, and therefore they would not be equally available to everyone in the voucher system. At the outset of the demonstration, about 59 percent of the aware parents knew about the free bus service. At the

same time, only 50 percent of the respondents knew that program changes could be made at any time during the school year; approximately one in three of the parents had misinformation about transfer policies, and about 20 percent had no information at all.

In sum, we see that at the outset of the demonstration, about two in five of the aware parents did not have correct information about transportation policies, and only one in two had accurate information about transfer policies. Remember that all of these figures are based on the sample of parents who knew about vouchers, the "aware parents." To include those parents who were ignorant of the voucher system would only increase the apparent lack of information. But by the outset of the second year of the demonstration things had changed somewhat. In the fall 1973 survey, 83 percent of the aware parents had accurate information about transportation policies, and 65 percent understood their transfer rights.

Determinants of Placement Decisions

In choosing a program for their child, parents must weigh a number of factors including: school characteristics (e.g., location, travel safety, ethnic composition of the student body), program characteristics (e.g., instructional arrangement, perceived quality of teaching, teacher-student ratio, subject matter emphases), beliefs about the child (e.g., the child's interests, strengths and weaknesses) and the family's values or schooling objectives. Exactly how these factors are weighted in decision making is unknown, but the results of the parent surveys in Alum Rock provide some insights where before we have had only hunches.

At the beginning of the demonstration, school characteristics, especially the location of the school, tended to be the predominate factor in placement decisions. Over 90 percent of the parents indicated that their children attended the school nearest their home, and district records

substantiate this figure. When asked to justify their program choices, 60 percent of the 496 aware parents interviewed in the fall of 1972 said that school location was the primary consideration, and another 104 parents listed location as a secondary factor in their decision making. This means that for over 81 percent of the aware parents, school location was a significant factor in their placement decisions. And a final piece of evidence which illustrates the importance of school location is that over 76 percent of these parents agreed with the statement "For most parents how close a school is to home is the most important reason for choosing a school for his children to attend".

The importance of school location in placement decisions has been observed before.[9] Jerdee and Rosen (1973), for instance, found in their decision simulations that, for Anglo parents, a 45 minute bus ride was a more important consideration than either the ethnic mix of the student body or the instructional arrangement. Similarly, Binderman (1972) and Weinstein and Geisel (1962), in their studies of black parents' decisions in southern "freedom of choice" districts, found evidence that school location was the predominate factor in placement decisions, although cognitive distortion of the distances to black and white schools apparently occurred in many cases.

In designing the standards for the first voucher demonstration, the Center for the Study of Public Policy (1070, p.59) anticipated that school location would be the dominate factor in placement decisions, at least in the early stages of the voucher demonstration; but this, they argued, would merely reflect parents' initial inability to see significant differences among the programs offered at different schools. (Cf. Jencks, 1972, p. 10988-10989) In marketing terms, the mini-school programs offered at the outset of the voucher demonstration probably represented undifferentiated products to the parents who had to make placement decisions.

By the second year of the demonstration, parents were more aware of the policies governing the use of vouchers, and they had a larger range of programs from which to choose. The addition of seven schools to the voucher system raised the number of mini-school programs from 22 to a total of 44; and programs, or at least program types (e.g., traditional vs. open classrooms), were beginning to earn reputations among particular groups of parents. In short, the perceived educational offerings were more highly differentiated than they had been during the first year of the voucher demonstration, and parents' placement decisions reflect this fact. In 1973, approximately 22 percent of the students reportedly attended non-neighborhood schools, and this represents a 10 percent increase over the previous year. Fewer parents (62 percent in 1973 vs. 81 percent in 1972) cited geographical location as a factor in their choice of schools, and more people cited program characteristics as the most significant factor in their decision-making.

In the most recent survey, aware parents who had operated under the voucher system for one year, were asked to indicate which of eight kinds of information they would find "very useful" in making program placement decisions; and Table 5 summarized their responses. Curriculum content

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was the most highly rated factor, especially among Anglos and high school graduates. How well children liked the program was the second most frequestly mentioned factor, and less educated parents tended to give this more weight than did the more educated respondents.

The child's test scores were an important consideration in selecting a program, according to 84 percent of the respondents, but black parents were less likely than others to say this. The average test scores of different programs were seen as less valuable than the child's scores;

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Mexican-Americans and less educated respondents tended to put more faith in average program scores than did the more educated parents and Anglos and blacks.

What teachers said about the program was rated as very useful information by 84 percent of the respondents, and about 15 percent more Anglos than blacks felt this way. Four out of five parents rated what counselors said about the program as very useful information for decision making, and these ratings were unrelated to either ethnicity or educational background. About half of the respondents judged what other parents said about programs to be useful information.

School location, which appeared to be the dominate factor in placement decisions during the first year of the demonstration (1972) was mentioned as an important factor by 86 percent of the aware parents interviewed in 1973; but school location was less important to black parents and to high school graduates than to other subgroupings. Remember that these ratings were collected from parents who had been involved in the education voucher system for one year. For these people, school location was probably less salient than other factors because they had learned to discriminate real differences between programs. Other evidence which supports this view is that, in the second year, (a) more children went to programs in non-neighborhood schools, and (b) fewer parents agreed with the statement that school location was the primary factor in most placement decisions.' The apparent decline in the relative importance of school location probably should be interpreted as a sign that the voucher system is working.

Conclusion

Parental decision making is the keystone of any voucher model, and this paper has examined the parental decision making process as it has unfolded in one public school voucher system. We assumed at the outset that

Parents cannot make intelligent choices among schooling alternatives if they lack knowledge about their alternatives or if they are unable to discriminate significant differences among alternatives. Given this basic assumption about parental decision making, what can we say about the voucher idea in general and the Alum Rock voucher demonstration in particular?

The Alum Rock experience seems to support strongly the voucher model premise that parents want to influence school decisions, and that the introduction of vouchers will increase parental interest in school decision making. At the outset of the voucher demonstration, most parents expressed positive attitudes toward parental involvement in school decision making, particularly in the area of curriculum content decisions. After one year under a voucher regime, more parents showed positive attitudes toward parental influence in school decision making; and this increased interest in schooling matters occurred in all areas of school decision making, including curriculum content, school spending, and personnel decisions.

The assumption that parents are competent to make schooling decisions received only mixed support from the results of the Alum Rock demonstration, and this raises some important questions about the distribution of benefits under any voucher scheme. At the outset of the Alum Rock demonstration, ignorance of voucher opportunities and policies was greatest among the very segment of the population that was supposed to benefit the most from choice in schooling, i.e., the educationally disadvantaged.

But things changed as the voucher demonstration progressed. After two cycles of the annual placement process, awareness of vouchers was widespread, although non-English speaking Mexican-Americans continued to be the least aware of voucher opportunities. During this period, there was a marked increase in the accuracy of parents' information about voucher policies and a major improvement in their ability to discriminate significant

differences between programs. But a substantial proportion of the parents (35 percent)--especially in educationally disadvantaged families--still misunderstood the system's transfer policies; and many parents (17 percent) were still ignorant of the district's busing policies, and again, the educationally disadvantaged were the least well informed.

Given these results,,should we conclude that this public schools voucher scheme, or at least the parental decision-making element of the scheme, has been a success or a failure? This is a loaded, and largely irrelevant, question for two reasons. First, the outcomes of a complex intervention like education vouchers are multidimensional, and the demonstration may succeed on some dimensions and fail on others. Global assessments are of small value here, and we must resist the constant tendency to look for clear cut, cognitively pleasing oversimplifications. Second, we have no real consensus about what constitutes "success" on any dimension. For example, is a voucher system in which one in every three parents is ignorant of their right to transfer children between programs a good situation or a bad situation? Indeed, we do have some glittering generalities about what vouchers are supposed to achieve--vouchers will "improve the education of children, particularly disadvantaged children" (CSPP, 1970, p.8, p. 120)--but we have few, if any, clear cut markers of "success" and "failure".

At the very least we can say that parents are beginning in the second year of the demonstration, to play the voucher game the way it is supposed to be played; awareness of vouchers is increasing, the level and accuracy of parent information about voucher policies, while far from ideal, is increasing; and more parents seem to perceive and value differences between programs. All of these things would suggest that the Alum Rock voucher system is working well, but to the extent that vouchers are supposed to ameliorate the relative educational and social disadvantages in our society,

we may question the success of this instrument of educational policy. It all depends, however, on how one conceptualizes the situation.

If the educational game is a zero sum affair, vouchers may merely exacerbate relative disadvantages, because the disadvantaged families are least informed and least competent in the short run to discover educational opportunities which meet their needs. Robert Leckachamn (1971), a critic of vouchers, may have hit the nail on the head when he summarized his fears about vouchers in these poignant words from Philip Slater's Pursuit of Loneliness:

> Poverty programs put very little money into the hands of the poor because middle-class hands are so much more gifted at grasping money--they know better where it is, how to apply for it, how to divert it, how to concentrate it. This is what being middle class means, just as a race means competition. No matter how much we try to change things it sometimes ends as merely a more complex, intricate, bizarre, and interesting version of what existed before. (1971)

On the other hand, the educational game may not be a zero sum affair, and getting there late may not be any different than getting there early; getting there at all may be the only criterion for winning. Schooling situations, probably contain elements of both zero sum and non-zero sum games. Where enrollments in a popular program are limited, getting there late means not getting in, but the ability to pressure schools into creating new programs holds out the possibility that everyone will eventually get the programs they think they want.

We have examined the most rudimentary factors which determine the ability to make choices, namely, parents' information about vouchers and

their desire to influence school decisions. But in focusing on these necessary but insufficient conditions for effective choice, we have ignored a crucial issue: the quality of parental decisions. Simply stated, the question is: How good are the placement decisions parents make?

There is a strong emotional reaction to say, "If parents don't know what is good for their children, who does?", but this is a much too cavalier attitude. Parents know a great deal about their children's interests and aptitudes; and presumably, they know what educational objectives they hold for their children, but that does not guarantee that they can convert this information into effective placement decisions. Professional educators who spend all of their time working with children and who ought to know what kind of child does well in what kind of instructional setting, have very little theory to guide them in matching children with alternative programs (but see Thelen, 1968, and Hunt, 1971). Why should we expect parents, who presumably are less familiar with the different instructional arrangements, to do any better job than educators when it comes to matching children and programs? The problem is, of course, to bring the parents' information about their children together with the educators' knowledge of how different children perform under different instructional regimes. But all of this concern about matching children with programs that maximize educational outcomes may be misplaced, for we are talking as if parents (or schools) tried to maximize certain educational outcomes; but in fact their decisions probably are aimed more at "satisficing" than maximizing.

The issue of how well parents make placement decisions boils down to one intricate question: What kinds of children end up in what kinds of instructional arrangements and with what size effects on what outcome dimensions? The Alum Rock voucher demonstration holds the potential to answer this question[10]. The answer (or answers) to this question will

not only test the mettle of the voucher notion, but will also improve our understanding of how parents make schooling decisions.

Footnotes

1. Most of the analyses reported here were completed while the author was a consultant to the Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, California; and additional analyses were supported in part by a grant from the National Institute of Education. However, the opinions expressed in this paper are the author's and should not be construed to be the views of the Rand Corporation or the National Institute of Education.

2. On April 1, 1970, 89 percent of the school children in grades 1 - 8 were enrolled in public schools; 10 percent were in parochial schools, and 1 percent were attending other private schools. Among secondary school pupils (grades 9 - 12), the percentages in public schools, parochial schools, and other private schools were 90 percent, 7 percent, and 3 percent, respectively. Source: Bureau of the Census (1973, p. 13). In 1972, the percentage of children enrolled in public elementary schools was still about 89 percent, but the percentage of students in public high schools had risen by about 2 percent, from 90 percent to 91.6 percent. Source: W. Vance Grant (1973, p. 3-4).

3. See Sonnenfeld (1973, p. 8-9).

4. Sizer and Whitten (1968) trace the history of the voucher idea in their proposal for "A Poor Children's Bill of Rights".

5. Some of the organizations which are on record as opposing vouchers include: National Education Association, National School Board Association, American Association of School Administrators, American Federation of Teachers, American Parents Committee, National Association of State Boards of Education, and the Council of Chief School Administrators. Source: S. F. Overlan (1972).

6. Eligibility for the federal hot lunch program is used as a measure of educational need, and although economic and educational disadvantage are correlated, there are some obvious problems with using economic need as a sole criterion for the allocation of compensatory education funds.

7. A more complete analysis of the 1972 parent survey, prepared by Robert Riley and others, is available from the Rand Corporation, 1700 Main Street, Santa Monica, California 90406. Please note that the 1973 survey was completed in late November, and the first unclean data became available only recently. The figures reported here for 1973 are based on these preliminary data files, and therefore small errors may have occurred at certain points.

8. The category labelled "Anglos" includes everyone who was not categorized as either Mexican-American or black. About 5 percent of the sample was categorized as something besides Anglo, black, or Mexican-American; and including these people in the Anglo category generally attenuates the relative differences between Anglos, blacks and Mexican-Americans.

9. Sonnenfeld (1973, p. 33-36) reviews this literature.

10. For a description of some preliminary work on this issue, see G. Bridge, "A contextual analysis of placement decisions in the Alum Rock voucher system". Teachers College, Columbia University, March 1974, mimeo.

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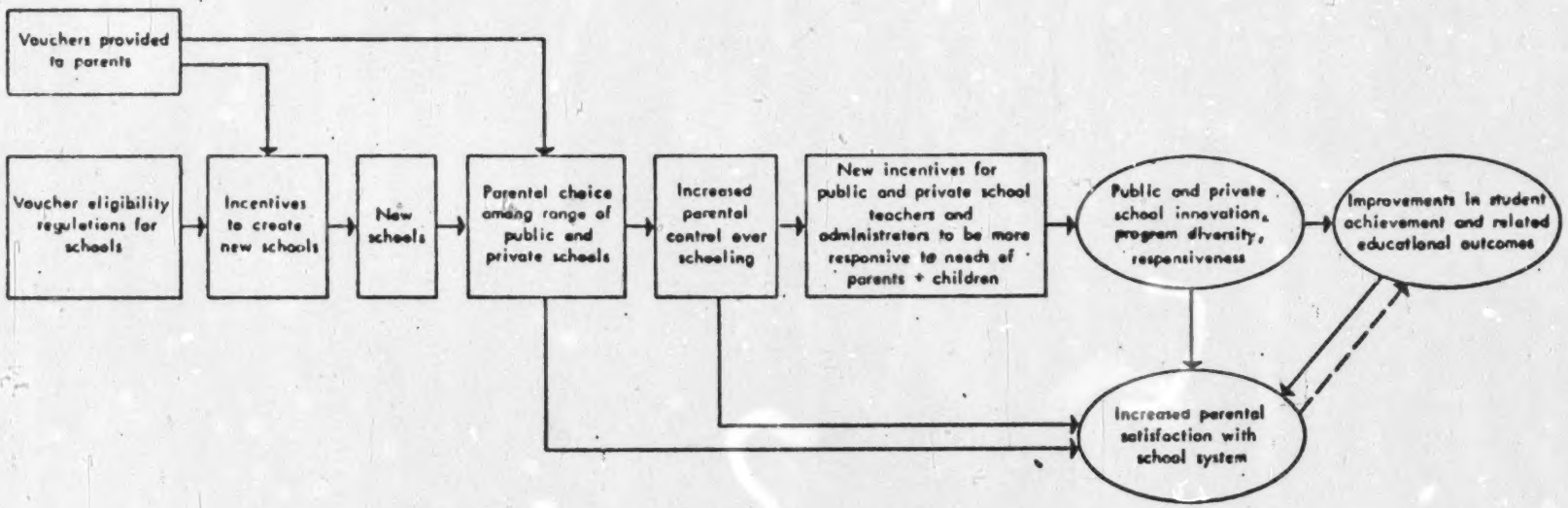
Vouchers provided to parents
Voucher eligibility regulations for schools
Incentives to create new schools
New schools
Parental choice among range of public and private schools
Increased parental control over schooling
New incentives for public and private school teachers and administrators to be more responsive to needs of parents + children
Public and private school innovation, program diversity, responsiveness
Improvements in student achievement and related educational outcomes
Increased parental satisfaction with school system

Fig. 1 - Model of assumed cause and effect relationships in an education voucher system. (Rand, 1972, p. 6).

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Table 1 Attitudes toward parent involvement in schooling presented according to respondent ethnicity

Percent of Parents Who Responded "Yes" to . . .	ANGLOS		BLACKS		MEXICAN-AMERICANS		TOTALS	
	1972 (267)	1973 (126)	1972 (65)	1973 (27)	1972 (268)	1973 (133)	(600)	(286)
Q36A. Do you think parents should be able to help decide which teachers get hired or fired in their children's schools?	36%	53%	45%	59%	35%	50%	36%	52%
Q36B Should parents be able to decide whether a principal is hired or fired?	53%	64%	57%	74%	53%	57%	54%	62%
Q36C. And should parents be able to help decide what should be taught in schools?	69%	69%	68%	89%	56%	66%	63%	70%
Q36D. Should they be able to help decide how the school spends its money?	57%	60%	62%	67%	52%	58%	55%	60%

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Table 2 - Attitudes toward parent involvement in schooling

presented according to respondent's educational background

Percent of Parents Who Responded "Yes" to . . .	Less than High School		High School or more		TOTALS	
	1972 (328)	1973 (161)	1972 (274)	1973 (125)	1972 (600)	1973 (286)
Q36A. Do you think parents should be able to decide which teachers get hired or fired in their children's schools?	39%	50%	34%	54%	36%	52%
Q36B. Should parents be able to decide whether a principal is hired or fired?	57%	58%	50%	67%	54%	62%
Q36C. And should parents be able to help decide what should be taught in schools?	57%	67%	69%	73%	63%	70%
Q36D. Should they be able to help decide how the school spends its money?	59%	54%	62%	68%	55%	60%

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Table 3

Knowledge of the voucher system and most school programs Data: 1972 and Fall 1973

	Percent of pupils in voucher areas "YES" to...			
	Q32 - "Have you heard about the education vouchers that students in this area will be able to use?"		Q33 - IF YES, "Some schools have more than one program. Do you happen to know which program (CHILD) is enrolled in?"	
	1972	1973	1972	1973
ETHNICITY				
Anglo[a]	90%	89%	82%	93%
Black	88%	100%	78%	82%
Mexican American (English interview)	78%	88%	74%	86%
Mexican American (Spanish interview)	66%	82%	64%	64%
EDUCATION				
Less than high school grad	76%	85%	72%	77%
High school grad	93%	96%	92%	90%
TOTAL (1972-600; 1973-206)	83%	97%	77%	85%

a) Includes respondents classified as "Other"

Table 4 - Aware parents sources of information about vouchers, Fall 1972.

	Now we would like to find out where and how much information you received about the voucher system and the different programs being offered by the schools	Total (496)	White (241)	Black (56)	Mexican American-English (143)	Mexican American-Spanish (56)
Mass Media	Radio and TV	19.6	23.2	16.0	15.4	17.9
	Newspapers	43.5	49.0	37.5	39.9	35.7
School Materials	School Materials	81.0	82.0	84.0	82.5	69.6
	School Bulletins	49.6	57.7	39.3	44.1	39.3
Formal Meetings	PTA Meetings	29.4	34.0	17.9	28.0	25.0
	Parent Meetings	31.5	37.8	25.0	23.8	30.4
	Board of Education Meetings	6.7	8.7	3.6	1.4	14.3
Talks with Friends	Talks with Children	25.8	28.2	21.4	23.8	25.0
	Talks with Friends	42.3	47.7	44.6	37.0	30.3
Talks with School Staff	Talks with Teachers/Principals	46.8	48.5	48.2	41.9	50.0
	Talks with Counselors	31.5	37.8	25.0	42.0	39.3

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Table 5

Determinants of program placements, Fall 1973

	Percent of aware parents who indicated that this was "very useful" in choosing a program (12)					
	TOTAL	ETHNICITY			EDUCATION	
		Anglo	Black	Mexican-American	Less than high school diploma	High school graduate
	(569)	(215)	(26)	(328)	(168)	(152)
1. Services for children like the program	94%	93%	89%	95%	95%	89%
2. What the program teaches	96%	100%	92%	94%	96%	90%
3. Your own child's test scores	86%	85%	77%	88%	88%	78%
4. Average test scores for the program	72%	67%	69%	76%	80%	63%
5. What other parents say about the program	50%	50%	53%	54%	52%	48%
6. What teachers say about the program	84%	88%	73%	83%	85%	83%
7. What parent counselors say about the program	81%	81%	81%	79%	80%	82%
8. Location of the school or program	86%	86%	73%	89%	90%	81%

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